

Men's tennis seniors shoot for history

By Brody Greenwald | April 19, 2001

The three-time defending ACC champion Blue Devils were untested at last year's conference tournament, and it is difficult to imagine them facing a formidable challenge this weekend either.

Following a week of rest, Duke's third-ranked men's tennis team will begin its title defense against a league of teams that the Blue Devils have overwhelmed in recent years. Last year's Duke squad cruised to the program's third straight ACC championship without giving up more than one point in any of its three matches.

This season, no ACC team has come closer to the Blue Devils than North Carolina, which lost by a comfortable margin of 5-2 that likely would have been 6-1 if Duke sophomore Joel Spicher had played. Even 20th-ranked Georgia Tech, the conference's three seed, was smashed 7-0 by Duke last month in Atlanta.

Ninth-seeded Maryland, a team that does not give tennis scholarships, will be Duke's first victim as the program attempts to win four straight ACC tournament championships for the second time in nine years.

"Maryland's not really going to be much of a challenge, but you just never know if someone comes up and plays at the top of their level," coach Jay Lapidus. "You can't let your guard down. You have to stay up for every match. You just never know. Strange things can happen."

Seniors Ramsey Smith, Marko Cerenko and Andres Pedroso have a chance to be only Duke's second graduating class to win the ACC title each of their four years.

Like this season squad, the 1996 team, which also won four straight ACC tournaments, included an almost-unstoppable senior and an immensely talented freshman. This year's freshman, 14th-ranked Phillip King, has taken over the mantle of No. 1 in Duke's lineup from Doug Root, the 1996 freshman who graduated last year after filling the top spot in the lineup for three seasons.

Still, the most notable transfer of power this season is the one that will culminate this afternoon, when Smith overtakes 1996 graduate Rob Chess as the winningest player in the history of Duke's program. A victory this afternoon against Maryland at No. 2 singles would give Smith 113 career wins, one more than former great Chess.

"It's great for Ramsey, it's great for the program, and it's great for people to look at, but what it comes down to is Ramsey has performed well in team matches and that just shows in his individual record," said Cerenko, who has six fewer career singles victories than Smith but has never lost an ACC match.

Lapidus also emphasized Smith's team-first attitude, noting that the son of legendary Stan Smith has not once mentioned the record in practice. Duke's coach, meanwhile, has greater concerns of his own, even if none of them can be exposed by the Blue Devils' eight ACC challengers.

Since a 4-3 loss March 16 to second-ranked Texas Christian, Lapidus has received only up-and-down play from his doubles lineups. The Blue Devils' pairing of Cerenko and sophomore Mike Yani have struggled the most, losing their last two decisions at No. 2 doubles. Despite inconsistency from Cerenko and Yani, Duke has been given a recent boost at No. 3 doubles, where sophomore Alex Bose initially stepped into the lineup March 30.

Bose relieved senior Ted Rueger, a former doubles specialist for Duke, of his spot. Beginning with an 8-1 slaughtering of 26th-ranked Virginia Commonwealth's No. 3 doubles tandem, Bose and Pedroso have won every match they have played together.

"I feel like Alex Bose has been a great addition," Lapidus said. "I really made a mistake earlier in the season by not playing him. I didn't realize how great a doubles player he is."